DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 153 757 CS 502 142

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TITLE News Homogeneity in Connecticut: The Trend toward Standarization among Connecticut's Daily Newspapers.
PUB DATE Apr 78
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (Chicago, Illinois, April 25-29, 1978) ; Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Information Networks; *Information Services; *Information Sources; Journalism; *Newspapers; *News Reporting; *News Writing; Telecommunication; Trend Analysis
IDENTIFIERS Communication Research; Connecticut

ABSTRACT

The news stories about the governor of Connecticut that appeared in 12 Connecticut daily newspapers during three-month periods in 1967 and 1976 were examined for the news sources used--whether the stories were written by local newspaper staff, local news service, or national wire service. The results demonstrate a significantly higher percentage of newspaper copy from wire services than from local sources during each sampling period, which supports the contention that media abundance is being mistakenly labeled diversity of information. The data also suggest a trend toward using more wire service stories and fewer staff generated news stories, reflecting both the economic constraints on local newspapers and the tightening job market for journalism graduates. The fact that one newspaper (the Hartford "Times") generated 95% of the 1967 staff-written stories and had gone out of business before the 1976 sampling further emphasizes how consumers are forced to rely on fewer sources for more news. (Tables of findings are included.) (RL)

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NEWS HOMOGENEITY IN CONNECTICUT: THE TREND TOWARD STANDARDIZATION AMONG CONNECTICUT'S DAILY NEWSPAPERS

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Presented to the Mass Communication Division of the International Communication Association, Chicago, April 25-29, 1978

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In recent years, American news media have been subject to considerable scrutiny by governmental agencies, citizens groups, and academic researchers. Broadly conceived, the examination has centered on the apparent dissolution of our libertarian heritage -- not in the form of constraints imposed on media institutions by government, but in a much more subtle and insidious manner: the exigencies of the economics that have been facilitating a monopoly in the marketplace of ideas. Simply put, the trend toward the demise of multi-independent newspaper markets and the increasing reliance on "mass produced" news have created an inordinate number of oligopolies in the marketplace of information.

Central to the notion of a diversity of ideas is the link between media pluralism and message pluralism. From Milton's "Areopagitica" to Jacques Ellul's "vital information" premise, scholars have long argued that popular wisdom can only flourish in a society where diverse ideas and opinions flow freely. Indeed, it is a fundamental democratic assumption that a competent citizenry is contingent upon the news media's commitment to this kind of diversity.[1] And yet, as Schiller reminds us, we must be careful not to confuse media abundance with media diversity. Schiller argues that it is easy to believe that a nation with 6,700 radio stations, 700 commercial television stations and over 1,500 daily newspapers provides a rich variety of information for its people. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that most Americans are trapped in what he calls a "no-choice informational bind," a condition attributable to the economic character of media institutions that encourages imitation, reinforcement of the status quo, and heavy intermedia dependency.[2] For example, Stempel in a 1967 examination, found that only 5% of the cities with newspapers have competing newspapers; 28% of cities with

radio stations have competing stations and 40% of the cities with television stations have competing stations.[3]

In large part, the media pluralism that does exist has been undermined by the increasing trend toward consolidation, a trend that has, according to Owen, two major vices:

> The first is that the quantity, quality and variety of messages produced may be inefficient in the economic sense; the second is that the Miltonian process may not work properly and ideas that are not the truth may come to dominate the intellectual market as a result of the systematic exclusion of messages that do not suit the economic or political interests of those who control access....[4]

In response to the problem of media consolidation regulative agencies and legislative bodies have passed laws and adopted policies to prevent its further occurrence. The Newspaper Preservation Act of 1965 indicated a clear recognition in Congress for the need to maintain the editorial integrity of newspapers that have been acquired by their competitors. Moreover, research designed to determine whether joint printing of newspapers maintains two different news voices in a community, led to the conclusion that news diversity was not apparent in such printing agreements.[5] Similarly, the Federal Communications Commission has embarked on a campaign to force divestiture of all newspaper-broadcasting holdings. If the campaign succeeds, a wholesale reorganization of the communication industry may occur.

However, the proponents of divestiture fail to realize that the economics of news production have the potential to create a situation where news homogeneity is not dependent on pluralism in ownership but pluralism in sources utilized in news collection. For example, because of economic constraints, few newspaper or broadcast outlets can afford correspondents in major news centers in America, let alone the world. However, in response to a perceived public interest in "instant" communications about national and world affairs, the news

media have steadily increased their reliance on wire service copy. In fact, as wire service saturation continues to increase on a market-by-market basis, it becomes apparent that a substantial proportion of the population relies heavily on but a few sources for most of its state, national and international news. Obviously, the wire services have a profound influence on deciding what will appear on the pages of literally hundreds of daily newspapers each day; and to this extent at least, the wire services contribute considerably to the enormous amount of uniformity among American news media. Furthermore, editors have preferences for specific wire services that leads to additional consolidation. Liebes found that editors have distinct preferences for one wire service over another in different content areas. He found by averaging preferences over five content areas, he found editors preferred AP 38%; UPI 21%; equal 30%; no opinion 12%.[6]

Similarly, Stempel found that production procedures may have more to do with its use of wire content than the nature of the wire. He reported factors such as time of day and perceived quality of the story to be determinates of which source will be used.[7]

Another major manifestation of the economics of diversity of information is the trend toward the demise of two independently published dailies in single markets. From 1910 to 1971, the number of cities with competing dailies have decreased from 689 to 37.[8] The loss of an entire reportorial staff in any market reduces greatly the diversity of news about local occurrences and forces consumers to choose between a heavier reliance on the surviving daily or to consume more broadcast news. Whatever the choice, the diminution of competing news outlets would seem to run counter to the liberatarian requisites for diversity.

In a study designed to test effects of competition in a market, Rarick and Hartman found that a daily newspaper devoted larger proportions of non-

advertising space to local content when the competition between the dailies was intense leading the authors to conclude competition leads to greater reportorial vigor and diversity in a community.[9]

Thus, in the present study, the authors were led to the following research questions:

1. To what extent have newspapers become more reliant on wire services for local and regional news?
2. To what extent does the death of one newspaper in a market lead to changes in local and regional reporting sources by its competitor?

Given the nature of the research questions and previous findings, the authors were led to the following hypotheses:

H1: Aggregately, state daily newspapers would demonstrate a significantly higher utilization of local or regional wire service stories in 1976 than in 1967.

H2: Among newspapers, there would be a significantly higher utilization of wire service than staff originated copy regardless of year.

METHODOLOGY

To answer the research questions, the authors choose to analyze the sources of news stories printed by every morning daily in the state of Connecticut during two time periods -- 1967 and 1976. The rational for choosing the specific time periods was as follows:

1. During 1967 the two publishing dailies in Hartford, Connecticut, the Courant and the Times, were nearly equal in circulation, status and revenues. Theoretically, with the papers in heavy competition, there would be as much motivation as possible to out-scoop one rival. Consequently, much staff competition would be expected.

2. The second period, 1976, was chosen specifically because the Hartford Times ceased publication on October 10, 1976. With only one paper in Hartford, it was of particular interest to determine how proportions in news sources changed in the period immediately after it ceased publishing.

During each of the years, a three-month period was chosen for examination based on the following criteria:

1. No extraordinary events involving the governor's personal life or gubernatorial/political scandal.
2. The legislature needed to be in session so that the 1976 period could be matched as closely as possible for news potential and executive and legislative interaction.

The months of May, June and July, 1967 were used for analysis of the competitive period and the months immediately following the death of the Hartford Times including one-half of October, November, December and one half of January, 1977.

The governor was chosen as the content focus because of the high relevance of actions taken by governor to all regions of the state.

Subsequently, a team of research assistants was divided into groups whose responsibilities included the searching of all the daily newspapers in Connecticut for stories printed about the governor in each time period. In all, 1009 stories reported in the 12 daily Connecticut newspapers were analyzed. Research assistants were instructed to note the following information about each of the news items:

1. Source (wire, staff writer, none reported)
2. Page number; number of column inches
3. Date
4. Paper
5. Photo and attribution

The data were keypunched and analyzed by SPSS cross tabulation.[7]

RESULTS

The first hypothesis predicted that Connecticut's daily newspapers would demonstrate a significantly higher utilization of local and regional wire services in 1967 than in 1976. The results of the investigation provided confirmation for the first hypothesis in that for the year 1967, 4[illegible]% of all news items about the governor were generated by staff writers, while the 1976 figure is only 23% (See Tables I and II). The most dramatic changes occurred in the large increase in the use of UPI wire copy and the substantial decrease in use of staff and bylined articles. The use of AP copy remained virtually unchanged.

The second hypothesis predicted that among newspapers, there would be a significantly higher utilization of wire service than staff originated copy regardless of year. The results provided confirmation for the second hypothesis as well (See Table III).

None of twelve papers utilized significantly more wire service copy than staff generated copy. More significantly, two papers (Milford Citizen and Torrington Register) utilized no staff copy; three others used 10% or less staff copy; and 3 other papers used less than 20% staff copy. Except for the Times, Courant, and New Haven Register (now only the Courant and the Register), most papers in the state rely very heavily on wire service copy for regional news.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study clearly indicate that most of the news about the governor of Connecticut comes from very few sources, and would seem to corroborate Schiller's argument that media abundance is being mistakenly labeled diversity of information. As Schramm found in his study of Oregon's daily newspapers, most dailies are "receivers" of news rather than "senders."[10] Only four of the 21 dailies in Oregon sent more news than they received, a finding that supports Patterson and Abeles' observation that most newspapers are "derivative" news outlets, media that distribute locally what a handful of "generative" media actually produce.[11]

Thus, a major implication of this study can be found in examining the death of the Hartford Times, one of the few generative media in Connecticut. During the 1967 period, the Times generated 95 percent of the staff stories written about the governor. Moreover, the Times was widely distributed and had at least the potential for sending more news than it received. With its demise, however, Connecticut residents were left with only one regional newspaper choice (the Hartford Courant or the New Haven Register -- the distribution areas generally do not overlap) to supplement their own, more modest dailies, and the derivative media in the state had lost an important source for state and regional news. In short, since the Times accounted for nearly 25 percent of all the stories written about the governor in the 1967 sample, it is a loss that forces consumers to rely on fewer sources for more news.

The second implication of this study is found in the evidence for standardization and homogeneity of media content. The trend to use less staff copy means that either stories aren't being written about the governor or that most of the stories are being taken from a central news source. When one partials out the impact of the death of the Times, it is apparent that the state's other newspapers are covering the governor in 1976 just as much as they were in 1967. The loss of local reportorial coverage of the governor provided by the Times was not compensated by an increase by the other papers, most notably the Hartford Courant. The loss, then, is not so much one of simple volume, but one of diversity of origination. One could hope that the other papers might attempt to compensate by increasing or initiating their own coverage of the state's most important office. However, the evidence does not support that notion. The decline in total staff stories is significant for two reasons: First, although local writers may not have the expertise or the experience of wire service reporters, they do have an appreciation for the integrity of local conditions and would therefore be in a better position to provide a meaningful and affectual context for state and regional news. That less than 30 percent of this type of

reporting is being done in connection to the governor is clear evidence that, for many readers, events have become "secularized," a phenomenon of twentieth century journalism. That is, in Connecticut, the distinction between "wholesale" news (as distributed by the wire services) and "retail" news (as published by the newspapers) has become more and more tenuous.

Even more obviously, though, is that the increased reliance on wire copy indicates that newspapers' decisions are being made for the same reasons that operate in other mass media: profitability. Using wire copy makes economic sense, and to the degree there is a wide difference in maintaining staff reporters and wire service subscription costs, there will always be pressure to cut staff and use more wire copy. As press critic Ben Bagdikian laments, "The standard local diet of news in too many highly profitable papers is mostly what comes over the transom."[12]

The third implication of this study lies in the future of journalism for staff/writers/reporters at moderately sized newspapers. As the Watergate related enthusiasm for journalism begins to ebb, there is little on the horizon to encourage entrance into the profession. As smaller dailies increase their dependency on the wire services, there will be fewer openings for aspiring reporters. And even for those who are fortunate enough to be hired by a major news institution (e.g. a metropolitan daily or the wire services) the experience is likely to become even more "compartmentalized" than before, and decidedly less challenging than a position on a small town daily. There is ample evidence that larger organizations are more likely to hire "like-minded" individuals, and the more formal hierarchies in these organizations are likely to exert even greater social control.[13] In short, given the trends we have identified, standardization is likely to increase not only between news media but within these media as well.

Finally, this investigation provides yet another piece of evidence for trends scholars, journalists, and legislators would like to prevent. We have uncovered consolidation in news sources, the demise of independent news sources, and an increasing standardization in story orientation. If one of the major functions of a newspaper is to interpret distant events in a local context, then the evidence we have put forth suggests that there is little chance for this function to survive in smaller newspaper markets.

TABLE 1

SOURCES FOR NEWS STORIES ABOUT THE GOVERNOR FROM TWELVE DAILIES

	Year			
Source	1967		1976	
United Press International	(125)	29%	(162)	48%
Associated Press	(113)	26%	(78)	23%
Staff	(75)	17%	(34)	9%
Staff & Byline	(121)	28%	(71	20%
	434	100%	345	100%

TABLE 2

COMPARISON OF STAFF AND
WIRE SERVICE UTILIZATION

	Year			
Source	1967		1976	
Wire service	(239)	55%	(240)	71%
Staff	(196)	45%	(105)	29%
Total	435	100%	345	100%

^{2} = 28.46 df = 2 p 01

TABLE III

SOURCE OF NEWS STORIES OF GOVERNOR BY NEWSPAPER*

	NEWSPAPER	SOURCE							
		UPI		AP		STAFF		BYLINE STAFF	
1.	Hartford Courant	(1)	6%	(3)	1.8%	(0)	0%	(69)	41.3%
2.	Hartford Times**	(0)	0%	(1)	1%	(0)	0%	(55)	56.7%
3.	Manchester Evening Herald	(30)	77%	(6)	15.4%	(11)	2.6%	(1)	2.6%
4.	Bridgeport Post	(5)	9.8%	(37)	72.5%	(0)	0%	(7)	13.7%
5.	Middletown Press	(15)	75%	(1)	5%	(2)	10%	(0)	9%
6.	New Britain Herald	(10)	43.5%	(6)	26.1%	(6)	26.1%	(0)	9%
7.	New Haven Register	(7)	4.4%	(12)	7.6%	(81)	51.6%	(34)	21.7%
8.	Journal Enquirer	(99)	78.9%	(21)	17.1%	(0)	0%	(2)	1.6%
9.	Milford Citizen	(62)	95.5%	(0)	0%	(0)	0%	(0)	0%
10.	Danbury New Times	(0)	0%	(55)	52%	(1)	1%	(18)	17.1%
11.	New London Day	(0)	0%	(34)	51.5%	(13)	19.7%	(1)	1.5%
12.	Torrington Register	(61)	4.5%	(25)	26%	(0)	0%	(0)	0%

$x^2 = 2769.59$ df = 44, $p < .05$

* Stories/articles with no attribution were deleted from the study because there was no reliable way to determine their origin. Most with no attribution, were less than four column inches and appeared to be press releases.

**Does not include 1976 sample months because it had ceased publication.

[1] See for example William T. Gormley, Jr., "Media Pluralism and Message Pluralism," in The Effects of Newspaper-Television Cross-Ownership On News Homogeneity (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Institute for Research in Social Science, 1976), pp. 1-22. For an insightful discussion on Ellul's views on communication and democracy, see Clifford G. Christians, "Jacques Ellul and Democracy's 'Vital Information' Premise," Journalism Monographs, No. 45 (August 1976).

[2] Herbert I. Schiller, The Mind Managers (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 19.

[3] Guido H. Stempel III, "A New Analysis of Monopoly and Competition," Columbia Journalism Review, Spring: 11-12 (1967).

[4] Bruce M. Owen, Economics and Freedom of Expression (Cambridge: Ballinger, 1975), p. 5.

[5] Birthney Ardoin, "A Comparison of Newspapers Under Joint Printing Contracts," Journalism Quarterly, 50: 340-347 (1973).

[6] B.H. Liebes, "Decision-Making by Telegraph Editors -- AP or UPI?" Journalism Quarterly, 43: 434-442 (1966).

[7] Guido H. Stempel III, "How Newspapers Use the Associated Press A-Wire," Journalism Quarterly, 41: 380-384 (1964).

[8] Owen, p. 79

[9] Galen Rarick and Barrie Hartman, "The Effects of Competition on One Daily Newspaper's Content," Journalism Quarterly, 43: 459-463 (1966).

[10] Wilbur Schramm, "Newspapers of a State as a News Network," Journalism Quarterly, 35: 177-182 (1958).

[11] Thomas E. Patterson and Ronald P. Abeles, "Mass Communications Research and the 1976 Presidential Election," Items (Social Science Research Council) 2: 13-18 (June 1975).

[12] Ben H. Bagdikian, "The Myth of Newspaper Poverty," Columbia Journalism Review, March/April 1973, p. 25.

[13] See for example Edward J. Epstein, News From Nowhere (New York: Random House, 1973), pp. 229-232.